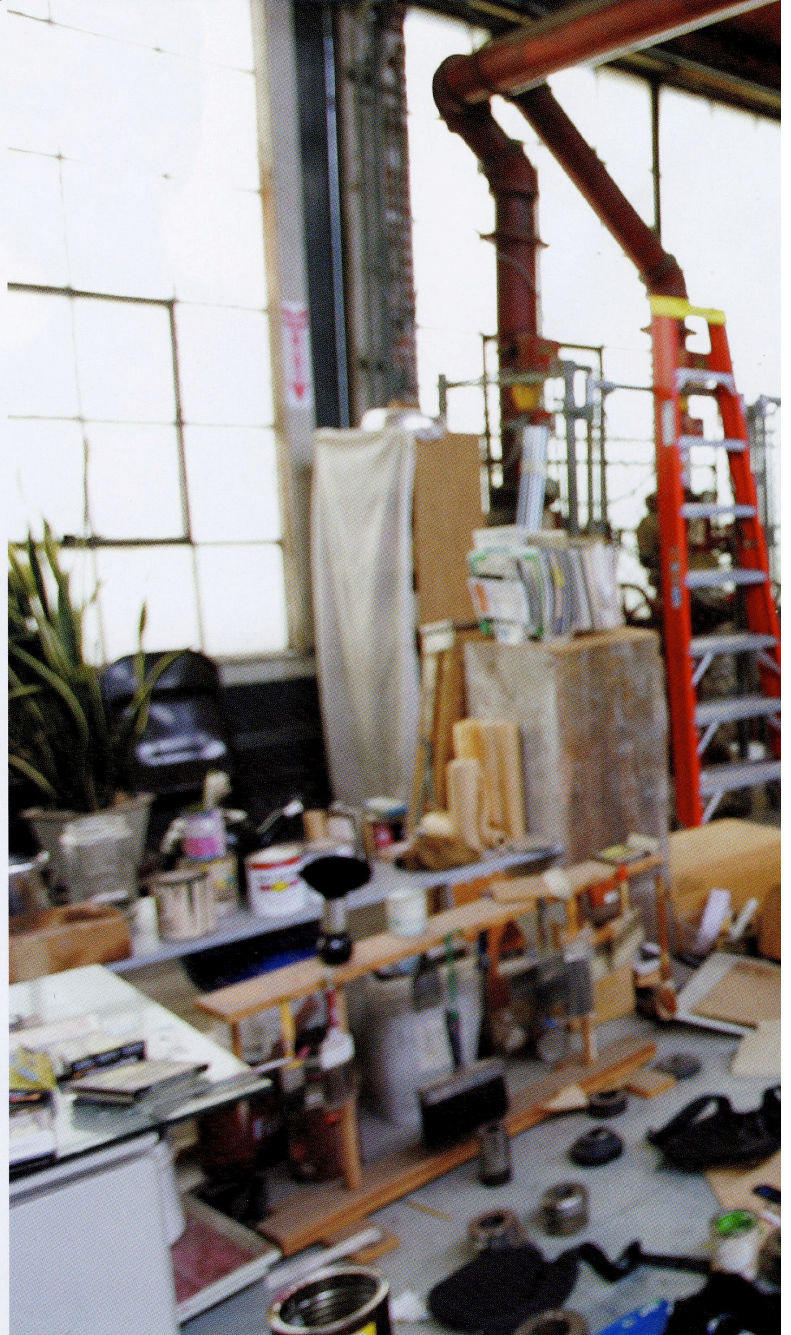


# OLIVER

Written by **ERIN CLARK**  
Photographed by **RANDY TUNNELL**

Oliver Jackson blindsided me. Setting up our interview on the phone, he was polite and seemingly mild-mannered. Driving up to Oakland, I somehow avoided the infamous traffic on Interstate 880. I located Oliver's place – a cool live/work space in an industrial building on the city's busy north side – with no problem at all. I even found a parking space right out front. So you can forgive me for thinking that somehow the cosmic forces were lined up in my favor that day. Well, the universe, as always, got the last laugh.

**IMAGE:** Oliver Jackson in his studio, Oakland, CA.

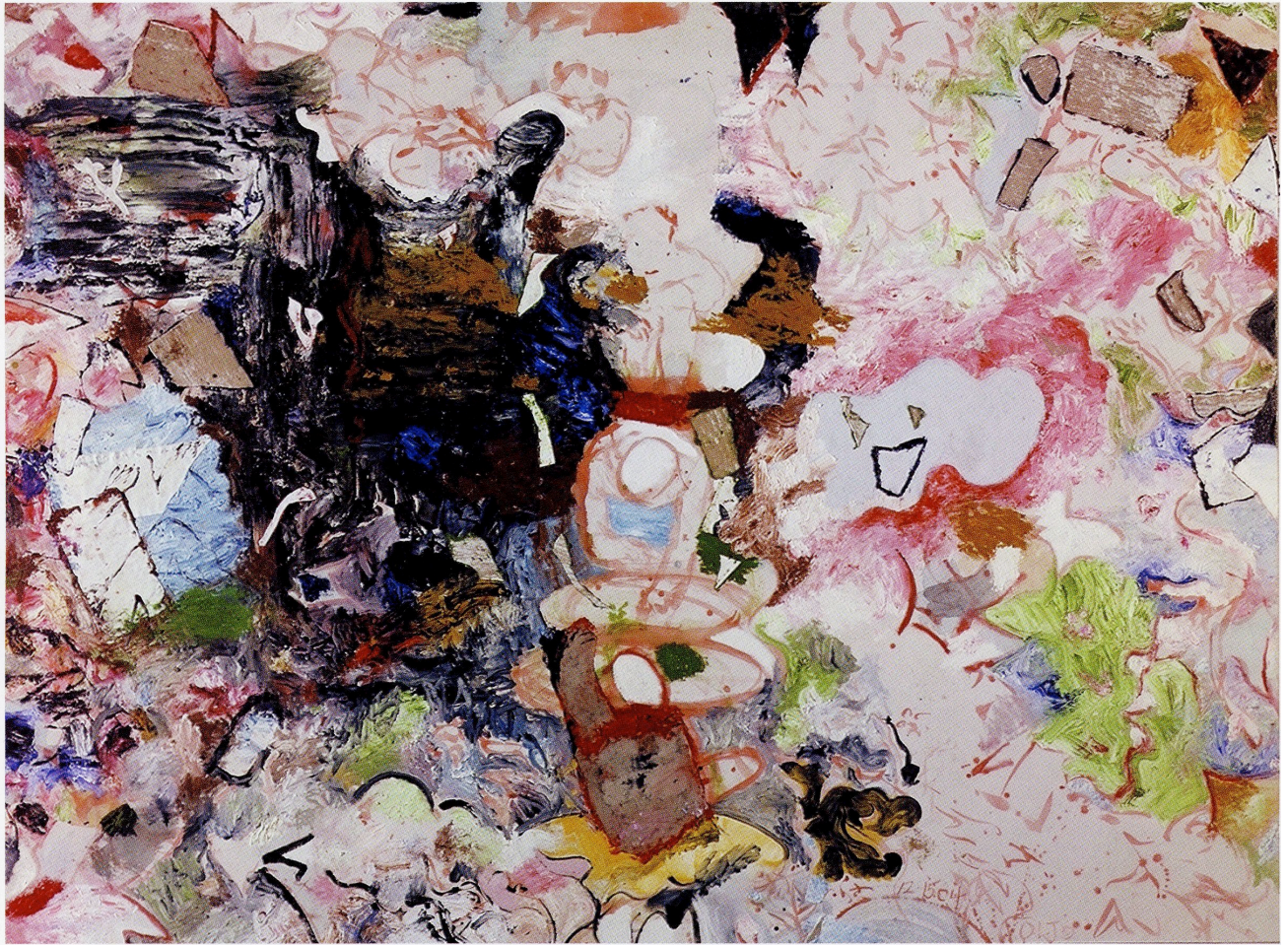




# JACKSON







**IMAGE:** *Untitled* (12.15.04) 2004, Oil-based pigments, mixed media on linen 108 x 144 inches. At right, *Untitled* (5.16.02) 2002, Oil-based pigments on linen, 34 1/4 x 34 1/4 inches. Private Collection, St. Louis, MO.

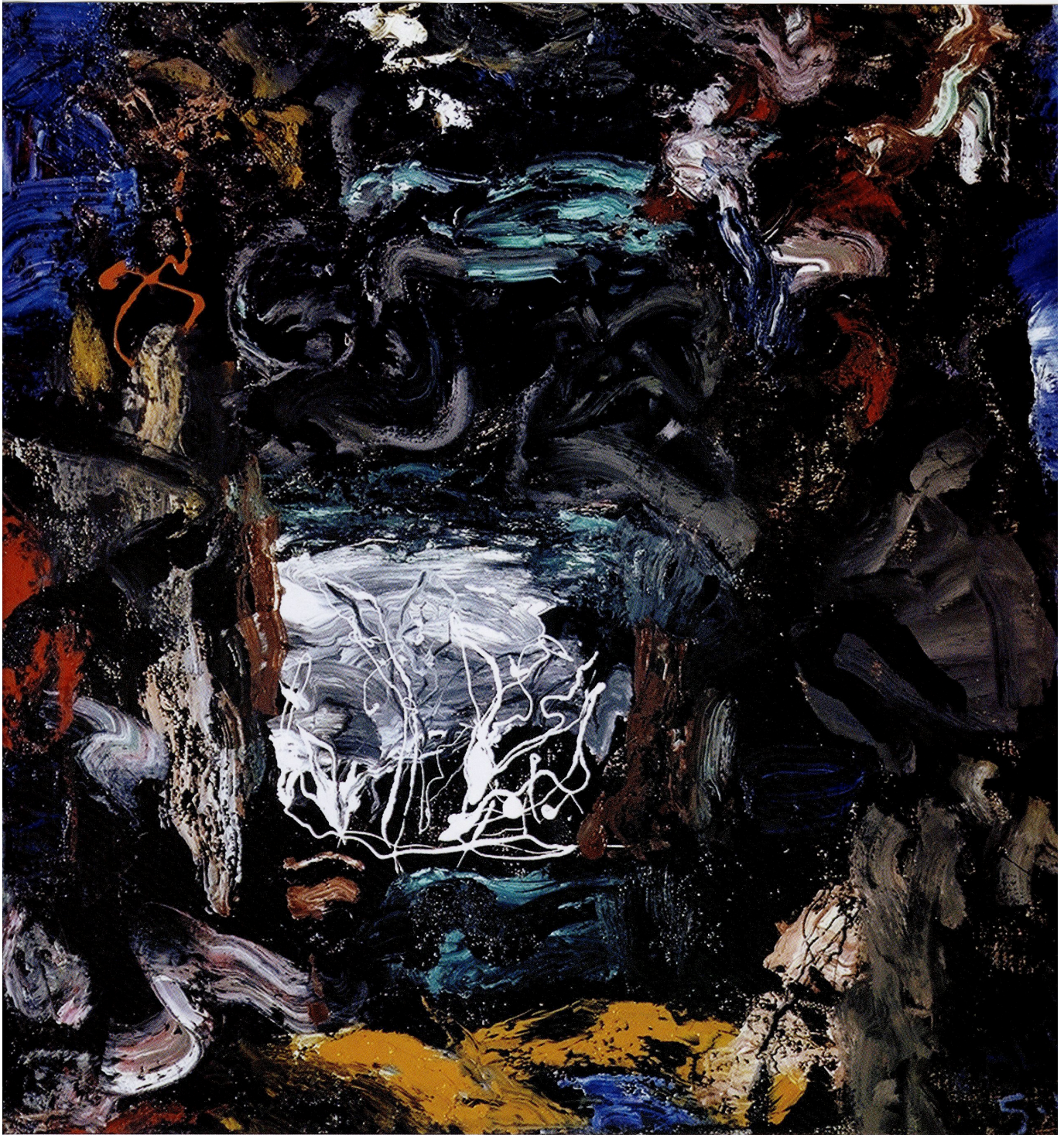
Jackson is one tough interview. He is 72 years old, but looks easily 25 years younger. As a prolific painter, sculptor and printmaker, he has secured his place among the best in the Bay Area over the last half-century. But his intellectual intensity can be scorching, especially if you aren't ready for it. With piercing dark eyes, he quickly makes his assessment of me. It's not personal, but it's clear he is not especially fond of writers — or magazines, for that matter. He acknowledges that interviews and articles are a necessary part of the art business, but he's not happy about it.

"The public has it backwards," he says. "The cult of personality is one thing. The work is another. Many people love the idea of magazines and being photographed because it's about them. That's

cool. But if it's about the work, I don't want to interfere. I don't want to get in the way. I understand the cult of personality in the marketplace. It's ironic that you have to do that (put yourself out there) to have them take the work seriously." For Oliver, it is all about the work.

It's telling that of Jackson's 5,700 square feet of living and workspace, about 5,000 are dedicated to the studio. He calls it his factory and in it, he is a different man. The mega-watt smile comes more easily, the shoulders relax just a bit and you can almost see him exhale. The sharp edges soften a bit. The studio is divided into different sections for painting, sculpture, printmaking and storage. Jackson works all the time so there are projects scattered throughout, in





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**IMAGE:** *Intaglio Drypoint I*, 1985, Printer's ink on paper 36 x 48 inches.

various stages of development, and the storage rooms are jammed with canvases and sculpture. Every inch of the studio is used either for making art or being inspired to make art.

A human skull catches my attention and I ask Oliver about it. "It really is beautiful in its own way," he says almost distractedly. "Great form." Something next to the skull catches his eye. He picks up what looks like a puzzle of metal pieces woven together. It's a model for what he hopes will be a large sculpture some day, but he's not sure if it will ever get done. "Fuckin' makes people nervous," he says as he moves on to the next part of our tour. I look closer and sure enough the metal pieces do gracefully form the outline of a man and woman intertwined. It is lovely, though — nothing vulgar about it.

Jackson was born in St. Louis in 1935. He got his formal art education close by, doing his undergrad work at Illinois Wesleyan University and then earning his Masters of Fine Art at the University of Iowa. In the 1960's, he got involved with the Black Artists Group in St. Louis. BAG was an arts co-operative that brought together and nurtured African American artists of all types: actors, painters, dancers, poets, filmmakers and jazz musicians. He developed a friendship with legendary saxophonist Julius Hemphill — a relationship he would honor years later with an exhibition at Harvard's Sert Art Gallery.

The Harvard exhibit combined the efforts of Jackson, who created six monumental canvases, and musician Marty Ehrlich, who composed and recorded an hour-long piece to be featured with the paintings. The two artists collaborated on the work while in-residence as visiting artists.

The artistic crossover was inspired by Hemphill, a musician known for his own avant-garde approach to jazz. While the years working with BAG were obviously inspirational for Jackson, he has grown weary of talking about the "black experience" in reference to his art. "The whole thing about being black, reasons for this and reasons for that... That whole American conversation is a pain in the ass," he says. "Write about artists and suddenly it's a black artist. No one ever says 'he's a white artist.' Ever wonder why? They are making a distinction for white people to not take it in the same way they look at the work of white artists. The labels obscure. If we pretend that we can tell race or gender, then we should be able to put up shows without names and everybody would be able to sort it out. 'Course you can't, so the culture sorts it out for you and you buy it. That's my point. You need to experience it (the art) for yourself. You need to trust your eyes and your own reaction."

The main part of Jackson's studio is dominated by a large platform where a piece of canvas is laid out on the floor. Paint cans, brushes and tools to push and pull paint are scattered around the perimeter. On the far wall, two large finished pieces hang side by side. The space around the painting stage is cluttered with all the things a painter might need. It looks a bit like a creative carnival, but Oliver bristles at the thought. "People come in here and they think I'm playing. I'm not playing," he says. "This is work."

And the work defies categories or easy explanations. Harry Cooper, a cu-



rator at the National Gallery of Art, discovered Jackson's work 20 years ago when he saw the cover of a Julius Hemphill album. Cooper says Jackson's art is all about space – both the paintings and sculpture. "He is a virtuoso sculptor, equally at home carving marble (which he approaches with an almost neo-classical technique) or, in a more contemporary vein, making dynamic constructions out of mixed materials," says Cooper. "Other media include drawing, print-making, and large-scale watercolors. But painting remains his primary means of expression. Many of the canvases are very large, requiring him to paint them on the floor. This brings a physical dimension to his work reminiscent of Jackson Pollock but applied to an art that retains essential ties to the human figure, however abstracted."

That's what the expert says, but here's my conundrum: I have spent a good amount of time looking at, even studying many of Oliver's canvases and sculptures. I know what I think, and what I feel about the work, but to try to explain it or write about it would be to ignore one of the basic tenets of Oliver's philosophy. My experience with his work is mine alone. To translate for the reader would be to interfere with their experience, and he just plain hates that. "I get tired of people asking me what I think about my work," he says. "What am I supposed to say? I think it's great shit – I made it, why wouldn't I say that? But what weight does that have to you? Not very much. You have to experience the work and I don't want to get in the way by telling you what I think." So, I'm going to respect that and let you draw your own conclusions.

The sculpture area of Jackson's studio is shrouded in plastic, mostly for practical reasons. Working with marble, Jackson has to contain the dust or risk ruining a canvas or print in another section of his cavernous space, but the synthetic curtain also isolates the work inside giving the space its own feel – very different from the rest of the studio. The monochromatic palate inside the bubble is cool and quiet. A fine layer of dust covers everything, including the floor, the plastic, the tools and the large chunks of marble that dominate the space.

Figures and forms emerge from the hard stone with a gracefulness that is extraordinary. For his sculpture, Jackson does not work exclusively with marble. He sometimes mixes his materials, and has been known to use just about anything to create a sculpture, but in recent years, marble has been his material of choice. In the 1980's, Jackson spent extended periods working on marble sculptures in Carrara, Italy, at the studio of the celebrated Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri. And in 1986, Jackson was commissioned to create a large marble sculpture for the Federal Courthouse in Oakland, which was installed in 1993.

A teaching job at CSU Sacramento brought Jackson to California in 1971. He stayed at the college for 31 years before retiring in 2002. Continuing education – his and others' – has always been a part of Jackson's life. He has served as a Visiting Artist in Residence at numerous institutions, including: Chicago Art Institute, Wake Forest University, North Carolina School of Arts, University of Washington, University of Iowa, Aix-en-Provence in France and the California College of Arts and Crafts Summer Institute in Paris. He also teaches workshops across the country, but is clearly happiest in his own studio, making stuff every day. Although healthy, he is feeling the pressure of time. There is so much in his head that he wants to translate into art. He doesn't like wasting time.

Oliver is also a very private man. Through the course of our conversation he reveals enough for me to figure out that there have been great loves in his life,



## OLIVER JACKSON

**IMAGE:** *Untitled Marble Sculpture* (8.85) (recto and verso) 1985, Marble, crayon, stainless steel 88 x 44 x 24 1/2 inches. Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art. Below, *Garden Series IV*, 2000, Oil-based pigments on linen, 108 x 120 inches. At right, various shots from Jackson's Oakland studio.

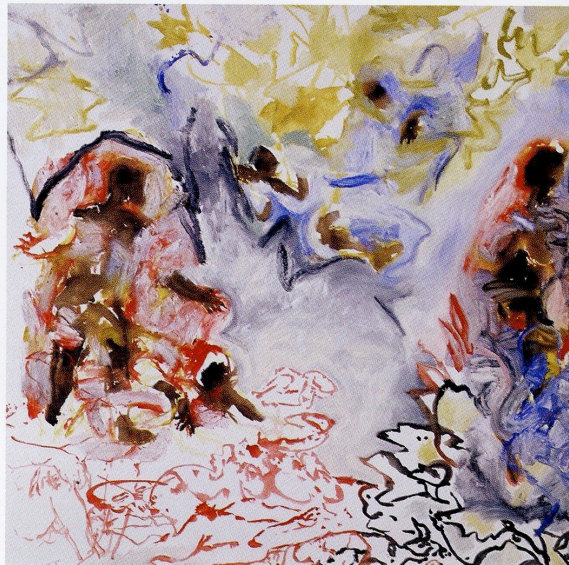










IMAGE: *Untitled (10.14.06)*, 2006, Oil-based pigments on linen, 96 x 108 inches.

found and perhaps lost, but he's not going into any detail. Those stories will stay close to his heart. His studio is clearly a one-person place. The art – the making of the art – is a good outlet for his passion. He lives for the “aha!” moment and thinks we all should, too. Jackson says such moments require no explanation; you just know it when they happen.

“The ‘aha!’ moment is completely pure,” he says. “You encounter this thing and this thing resonates with you in a way you’ve never experienced before. It’s being completely alive. You can try to categorize it or dominate it by putting it in some kind of order, but that is a losing proposition. If something like a painting can move you like that, why would you want off that hook?”

Jackson says the creative process is like having a child. You bring it into the world, do the best you can and then let it go. Sure, he says, an artist puts everything into a piece, but in the end the work stands alone.

“Paintings require a set of eyes,” he says. “They don’t require a group. They are contemplative because they don’t require you to do shit. They don’t require you to applaud, they don’t require you to agree or disagree. They only require that you look at them. It’s not a communal experience and that appears to be uncomfortable for many people. We, as a culture, don’t encourage people to mull things over and we should.”

**“If we pretend that we can tell race or gender, then we should be able to put up shows without names and everybody would be able to sort it out.”**

My four-hour conversation with Oliver has been simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. Very much like his work, his philosophy pulls you into a world that is not clearly defined or understood, and sometimes out of the comfort zone. But it’s also a pretty provocative place. It makes you think. We

have come to a point of mutual respect. I understand his reluctance to — as he puts it — “get in the way” of the art. In return, Jackson trusts me to get it right. We’ve come a long way in a short time.

Maybe the cosmic forces were lined up in my favor that day after all.

